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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000365

SIPDIS

AMEMBASSY MINSK SENDS  
KYIV FOR USAID

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/15/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: BELARUS: POLL POINTS OPPOSITION TOWARD BREAD AND  
BUTTER ISSUES

REF: A. 07 MINSK 920

[1B.](#) MINSK 90 (AND PREVIOUS)

[1C.](#) VILNIUS 309

[1D.](#) MINSK 224

Classified By: CDA Jonathan Moore for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[11.](#) (C) An April 2008 poll commissioned by the USAID-funded International Republican Institute (IRI) demonstrated that the Belarusian public remains concerned about socio-economic issues like cuts in state benefits. Following a presentation on these data, the Presidium of the United Democratic Forces agreed May 8 that their upcoming parliamentary election campaign would focus on three issues: benefit cuts, the rights of entrepreneurs and the need for improvements in health care. Though a consensus was reached on issues for the election, no decision was reached on an overarching theme for the campaign. USAID implementers continued to lament politicians' lack of desire to travel to Belarus' regions for party development work. End summary.

Social and Economic Issues Dominate Public Opinion

[12.](#) (C) USAID-funded IRI recently commissioned a nationwide poll to determine possible issues and themes for the United Democratic Forces' (UDF) 2008 parliamentary election campaign. The poll was conducted by a representative of the Gallup Poll in conjunction with the Minsk-based independent pollster Novak and had a sample of roughly 1500 respondents selected from throughout Belarus.

[13.](#) (C) In a briefing for A/DCM and Poloff, IRI Country Director for Belarus Andrew Olson noted that economic and social issues clearly resonated with the Belarusians surveyed; he added that within this broad category, three issues combined widespread public attention with broad public opposition to Lukashenko regime policies and thus were best suited for the UDF campaign -- social benefit cuts, entrepreneurs' rights and health care.

[14.](#) (C) The social benefit cuts that the regime implemented in late 2007 were a matter of universal public knowledge (ref A). Of the 99 per cent of respondents who were aware of the cuts, 80 per cent opposed them, and 72 per cent claimed

the cuts had had an effect on their lives. Respondents also displayed a marked desire for change in state-sponsored health care. Eighty-five per cent of respondents called for change in this sector, with large pro-change majorities in every age group, including the traditionally pro-regime elderly.

15. (C) Olson noted that he was surprised by the widespread public knowledge of January and February entrepreneurs' demonstrations against hiring restrictions (ref B). Eighty per cent of respondents knew of the entrepreneurs' rights dispute and, of these, sixty per cent supported the entrepreneurs' position. (Note: While the regime-controlled press largely ignored the entrepreneurs and their protests, Russian print and electronic media gave them surprisingly prominent and extensive coverage. End note.)

#### UDF Presidium Agrees on Issues, Fails to Find Theme

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16. (C) Olson told Emboffs he had briefed the UDF's 17-member Presidium (including party chiefs and analysts) on the results of the poll May 8 and all supported benefit cuts, health care and entrepreneurs' rights as the three issues the UDF would use in its 2008 campaign. While they agreed on the issues, Olson was clearly disappointed that the Presidium had failed to identify an overarching theme, like "Change" or "The future," that could be used to unite these issues in UDF campaign literature.

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17. (C) Olson did not hide his displeasure with UDF leadership on other fronts as well. He told Emboffs he had chided the UDF leaders for failing to do a better job of motivating their memberships to participate in the April 26 Chernobyl March (ref C), and for their lack of interest in traveling to Belarus' regions for party development work. Olson noted that their lack of regional development work was all the more blameworthy since there were donor funds to support just such trips.

18. (C) In a separate conversation with A/DCM and AID Country Director, David Hamilton, who manages Belarus programs for the USAID-funded National Democratic Institute, confirmed that party leaders hadn't been doing the regional travel necessary for party development and strong local coalitions. He said that in regions like Vitebsk, where there were feuds within the opposition, compromises could be found. Such compromises would not be found, however, without the active engagement of top party leadership.

#### Social Campaign Could Lead to Crackdown

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19. (C) While he was pleased that the polling data had yielded a clear set of issues on which the UDF could base its 2008 campaign, Olson noted to Emboffs that he expected GOB security services to clamp down forcefully on a campaign based on social issues. In his view, the GOB had a deep fear of social activism precisely because they thought it would resonate with an aggrieved public. During UDF planning for the November 2007 Social March (ref A), itself a protest against social benefit cuts, numerous print runs of materials had been seized by the GOB and printing houses used by the opposition had been shut down. Olson expected a similar crackdown from the GOB in this electoral campaign, a crackdown that could make the printing and distribution of UDF campaign materials increasingly difficult.

Comment

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¶10. (C) The results of this IRI poll are quite similar to other data gathered recently by independent pollsters: average Belarusians are deeply concerned by socio-economic issues like benefit cuts (ref D). Since global inflationary pressure only exacerbates problems such as these, the UDF would seem to have found the right issues on which to organize its '08 campaign. That said, the success of such a campaign will depend in large measure on the zeal with which party leaders and candidates employ the campaign strategy based on such issues.

MOORE  
CLOUD